Cox, (Charles) Brian (1928-2008)

Cox, (Charles) Brian (1928–2008), poet, literary critic, and educationist, was born on 5 September 1928 at 142 Humberston Road, Grimsby, Lincolnshire, the second son of Hedley Ernest Cox, coal exporter's clerk, and his wife, Rose, *née* Thompson, lady's maid. Attendance at Nunsthorpe elementary school laid principles of academic rigour and coherent ethics that stayed with him throughout his life. He took from his family's Methodism an almost secular sense of kindness. The importance of family and community was reinforced by his mother's death when he was aged ten; he remained thereafter close to his father and older brother. Much of his poetry expressed a sense of human vulnerability and love. His subsequent education built on that foundation, but was in itself less fulfilling. He transferred at the age of eleven to Wintringham secondary school, and thence to Pembroke College, Cambridge, on an open scholarship gained in 1946 but deferred to 1949 for army service. He graduated with a first in English literature in 1952, and then took an MLitt for a thesis on Henry James in 1954. His experience of academic study throughout these fifteen years was worthy but, as he later wrote, somewhat unconnected to his real pleasure in reading and writing.

Nevertheless several experiences at Cambridge had a permanent impact on Cox. He properly met his future wife, Jean Willmer (though they been acquainted at secondary school), who was a schoolteacher; they married at the Memorial Mission Hall in Grimsby on 7 August 1954, and their partnership he later described as ‘completely happy’ (*Great Betrayal*, 85). He formed a lasting, close friendship with A. E. (Tony) Dyson, a fellow student of literature. While a postgraduate student he taught on two days each week for the Workers' Educational Association, resuming an involvement in adult education that had started when he had been recruited into the Royal Army Education Corps and confirming his belief that great literature ought to be made available to everyone.

Cox was appointed in 1954 to a post as assistant lecturer in English at Hull University, staying until 1966. His colleagues included Richard Hoggart, Malcolm Bradbury, and Barbara Everett, and he became friends also with the university librarian, Philip Larkin; it was a politically diverse group, but all were committed to the wide dissemination of high literary standards. Cox's most lasting contribution to that end came in 1959 when, with Dyson, he founded*Critical Quarterly*, aiming to provide informed debate about literature to an educated public. It was highly successful, achieving over 5000 subscribers, among whom were English teachers in more than half the grammar schools of Britain. The journal ran summer schools for teachers and senior school students. It held poetry competitions which encouraged the work of several of the new voices of the 1960s including Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, R. S. Thomas, Thom Gunn, and Larkin, who remained a strong supporter of the journal and a source of advice. It also led to two volumes by Cox and Dyson, *Modern Poetry* (1963) and*Practical Criticism of Poetry* (1965).

The journal always had educational aims, but this became more overt and controversial when it published a series of five *Black Papers* on education from 1969 to 1977. These collections, edited by Cox and Dyson, provided platforms for polemical protest against student militancy in universities, comprehensive secondary schooling, and ‘child-centred’ methods of teaching. Cox remained ambivalent about the achievement of the *Black Papers* for the rest of his life. On the one hand he believed that they had shifted the terms of debate, ensuring the acceptance that ‘standards of excellence must be maintained’ (*Black Papers on Education*, 1971, 33). On the other he deeply regretted being labelled as right-wing, especially by critics

on the left who seemed not to have read what he wrote.

Cox insisted that he was a liberal, both in the sense of respecting diversity and equal rights, and also in his belief in human reason and the importance of liberal education for all. His textbook with Dyson on the practical criticism of poetry had established—well before these controversies—that the engaged academic ought to support schoolteachers constructively. His greatest contribution to education policy was to chair (in 1988–9) the official working group that created the English national curriculum for schools in England and Wales, publishing a report that sought high standards and knowledge of a literary canon alongside free expression—drama, creative writing, discussion, and reading for pleasure. The report was also well informed by research on how children become literate, and showed a respect for dialect and for bilingualism alongside an insistence on the importance of standard linguistic forms. The price of this balance was that the resulting curriculum was gradually eroded by the mechanistic preferences of both Conservative and Labour governments from the mid-1990s onwards.

Cox, who was appointed CBE in 1990, was widely acknowledged to be an extraordinarily courteous man with a firm commitment to public service, a belief in teaching as a powerful force for good, and loyalty to what he called early in his career the ‘ideals of progress, liberty, tolerance and reason’ (C. B. Cox, *The Free Spirit*, 1963, 161). The tragedy for his optimism was that he lived at a time when faith in such ideals was widely contemned.

Cox's poems were published in *Two-Headed Monster* (1985), *Collected Poems* (1993), *Emeritus* (2001), and *My Eightieth Year to Heaven*(2007). Among his other works were a study of Joseph Conrad (1974) and an edited collection of profiles of African writers (2 vols, 1996). He lived latterly at 20 Park Gates Drive, Cheadle Hume, near Stockport, and died there on 24 April 2008, of cancer of the prostate. He was survived by his wife, Jean, and their three children.

Sources

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